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EVALUATION OF THE REVIEW MEETINGS ON AFRICAN LDCs

M81-1997

As part of the preparations for the United Nations Conference on the Least Developed countries, and in accordance with resolution 7 (III) adopted in February 1980 by the Preparatory Committee for the Conference at its first session, as well as with the conclusions and recommendations adopted at its second session in October 1980 (A/CONF.104/PC.9, Chap.II), which were endorsed by the General Assembly in resolution 35/205 of 16 December 1980, the following groups of review meetings were convened for the Least Developed Countries (LDCs):

	Dates	Venue	Chair persons
Asia and the Pacific (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Democratic Yemen, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Maldives, Nepal, Samoa, Yemen)	30 March-10 April	Vienna	Sartaj Aziz Andrew Joseph Jan P. Pronk
Eastern Africa (Burundi, Comoros, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Sudan, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania)	4-15 May	Addis Ababa	Adebayo Adedeji M.J. Anstee Jan P. Pronk
Western and Central Africa (Benin, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Upper Volta) and Somalia	25 May - 5 June	The Hague	Michel Doo Kingué B. Bell
Southern Africa (Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi) Guinea-Bissau and Haiti	22-26 June	Geneva	C.S. Vegega P. de Seynes Jan P. Pronk

In preparation for its separate review meeting with its development partners, each least developed country had prepared a presentation of its plans and programmes for the 1980s. Each least developed country invited a number of development and aid partners and international organizations to participate in the meeting. The idea of clustering the meetings for the LDCs by subregions was predicated on the assumption that the LDCs, inspite of differences in specific needs and conditions, share common problems which need to be highlighted. In practice, there was no provision for countries to meet in clusters to discuss and evaluate the common problems and issues emerging from their individual review meetings and to evolve a common stand. However, the clustering was advantageous to the development partners insofar as it enabled them to participate in as many review meetings as possible at minimum cost.

This paper reviews the three rounds of review meetings held for the African LDCs. The aim is not to replicate the country reports adopted at the review meetings, but to present an overview and overall evaluation as perceived by African delegations and the ECA secretariat at the meetings.

The substantive business of the review meetings for individual least developed countries generally began with the head of the delegation making a comprehensive introductory statement, highlighting the country's development problems and potentials; the main development constraints encountered and efforts to overcome them; the major development objectives to be pursued in the 1980s and the intended strategies and sectoral priorities and policy instruments; the requirements and magnitudes of external assistance and aid.

Next, the representatives of aid and trade partners and of the international organizations present at the meetings were called upon to comment on the country presentation and programmes, after which a general discussion and exchange of views and ideas ensued.

The set-up of the review meetings generally offered a unique opportunity and forum for some exchange of views and ideas on the development problems and programmes of the LDCs. Many substantive issues were raised and deliberated upon with respect to the development priorities of the LDCs, their investment targets and allocation, resource mobilization strategies and efforts, the consistency of development objectives and priorities with intended investment structures, and the framework for subregional economic co-operation and development. The review meetings gave each least developed country the opportunity to make known and discuss its development plans and programmes for the 1980s with its development partners in some detail, and to receive preliminary reactions, comments, questions and criticisms which could lead to necessary improvements in the programmes. The meetings were equally benefitial to development partners, both in revealing the thinking and strategies of the LDCs for the 1980s, and in providing some insights into their development problems, needs and potentials. The meetings thus served as a mutually-benefitial two-way learning process through dialogue.

However, on the average, only two sessions were provided for reviewing each of the country presentations and one for the adoption of the report. The shortness of time, the nature of the country presentations with only very preliminary short project profiles, the delays in submitting the country presentations to the development partners, the clustering of meetings meant that only limited time was available for development partners to analyse in depth the country presentations. Equally on the side of the least developed countries themselves, the country presentations were prepared in very short time. Nevertheless, the level of most country presentations was high by any past experience in African least developed countries.

The preparation of country presentations for some 31 least developed countries covering the 1980s has enabled the international community at large to have a harmonized estimate of the requirements of the LDCs as a group, and to assess the magnitudes of their problems and difficulties. The fact that most country presentations adhered to a common

scenario envisaged in UNCTAD resolution 122(V), namely, the doubling of GDP during the decade under certain trade gap limits and a doubling, trebling and quadrupling of aid, has led automatically to more or less common assumptions about the capital-output ratios, high export assumptions and relatively modest import elasticities compared with the past. It also seems that there were general expectations of immediate massive increase in aid which is reflected in the relatively short gestation periods assumed in country presentations.

The reaction of development partners was general, guarded and not specific. Even references to individual development partners in the reports were avoided, which is regrettable indeed. For, had this been allowed, the review meetings would have been a step forward in the right direction insofar as the least developed countries concerned would have kept in mind the observations of individual development partners and would have been eager and willing to undertake bilateral discussions to cope with such observations and the second round of review meetings would then have centred on pledging with as little procedural problems as possible.

In fairness to the least developed countries, the extreme shortage of funds and the limited available time was such that they could not have undertaken pre-feasibility and feasibility studies for hundreds of projects without assistance from the development partners. In addition, owing to the extremely high costs involved, the lack of prior common agreement between the LDCs and their development partners on the types of projects to be identified, the exercise would have been futile and rendered obsolete within a short period of time by the high rate of inflation prevailing in the world. Cost overruns would have been substantial. Besides, the presentation of detailed project profiles was not suitable for such fora as the review meetings.

From the country presentations and the statements made by delegations from the African LDCs, it was clear that their development priorities are largely in conformity with the Lagos Plan of Action and the African Strategy of Development for the 1980s, wherein the emphasis is on the development of agriculture to achieve self-sufficiency in food as well as on efforts to promote exports, agro-based industries and the development of transport and communications. And this was generally appreciated by the representatives of the development partners and the international organizations. It was also clear that while the African LDCs are asking for increased external assistance, they are at the same time also emphasizing self-reliance and self-sustainment, and that maximum efforts are envisaged for the mobilization of domestic resources, both financial and human.

Through the discussions and dialogues at the review meetings, a better understanding and appreciation of the fundamental problems of the LDCs and of the many approaches to their solution seemed to have emerged. For instance, it became clearer, more than ever before, that there can be no great line of demarcation between directly productive and social investments, for this set of countries, and between food and cash crops production. The necessity of new investments for the full utilization of existing under-utilized capacities was also underscored, and so was the need for irrigation in general.

In addition to serving to highlight the problems and the specific needs of the LDCs, the review meetings also helped in eliciting from development partners an indication of general support and willingness to continue to assist the LDCs in their development effort. Not only did donor countries express basic approval for the development orientation chosen by governments of many of the LDCs, the review meetings made it possible for several of them to indicate in general terms future support even for countries with whom they had no close trade and/or aid relations in the past. Bilateral relations were often highlighted in the course of the meetings but the main thrust was directed at securing overall international support for each individual least developed country.

In this respect and in many other important aspects, the outcome of the review meetings was due to a combination of factors:

(i) the broad attendance and participation in the meetings. The meetings showed, for instance, the deep involvement of the international organizations in the development process of the LDCs, and helped to underline and underscore both the continued need for them and the full use than can be made of them in the implementation of the Action Programme.

(ii) the clarity and very detailed nature of the introductory statements made by the LDC delegations and the informative and high quality nature of the documentation submitted by most of the LDCs.

(iii) the skill and authority with which the meetings were chaired and their proceedings handled. The fact that the chairpersons were eminent personalities from the UN system helped in no small measure in enhancing their image of neutrality while their wide experience of development problems facilitated their role in bringing together all sides.

(iv) the cordial even if sometimes less than frank atomosphere in which the talks took place, the candour, understanding and spirit of international solidarity that often prevailed during the discussions and deliberations were indeed encouraging. Issues of ideological and political differences were not allowed to intrude into the meeting nor were confrontations based on differences in economic and socio-political systems.

While the proceedings of review meetings in some cases gave cause for some optimism about aid prospects, no specific aid commitments or pledges were made by the representatives of the development partners at the meetings. There is of course the argument that the review meetings were never envisaged or expected to lead to specific pledges or commitments in the first place. Development partners were noticeably more anxious to inquire into the various areas of the countries' programmes but least willing to commit themselves or be identified in specific terms even in the general offers of assistance.

One had the feeling that development partners were generally overcautious and afraid of being compromised in any future negotiations by anything they say at the meetings. What is not clear is whether the African LDCs were happy or completely satisfied with review meetings that turned out in outcome essentially as fora for generalised discussions on development problems, policies and strategies.

Part of the expectations and hope regarding the outcome of the review meetings was that development partners would agree to give assistance to the LDCs on much better terms and conditions than before. To this end, the question of aid modalities was raised in virtually all country presentations, with most of the countries stressing the urgent need to made administrative and legal procedures more flexible, and expressing the hope that both the volume, terms and conditions of aid, and its delivery system would be considerably improved in the near future. Except in one or two cases, however, development partners were reluctant and in most cases outright unwilling to discuss the issues of aid modalities at length, preferring instead to devote most of their interventions to general development problems and investment issues. The little discussion that took place on aid was on concessionary rather than non-concessionary aid. The feelings of donors seemed to be that the issue of aid modalities was more appropriately tackled in a bilateral setting or forum.

There were other equally important problems and issues which were circumvented by the review meetings as well. These included the thorny issues of oil import prices and its impact, the terms of trade, commodity stabilisation measures and the balance of payments -- all of which come under the ambit of a short-term action programme. Overall, there were too many questions deferred by donors to Paris and the impression was that they either did not have enough time to go through the country presentations, in any detail, or that they considered those issues as belonging more appropriately to some other fora. But Paris may turn out to be just another political forum, and, in which case, just as unsuited as a platform for such issues.

In spite of general indications of willingness of development partners to continue to assist the LDCs, their general feelings seem to be that the LDCs were asking for too much and that they do not have the necessary absorptive capacity to implement the projects contained in the country presentations. Many of the country programmes were seen by donors as rather ambitious and unrealistic in terms of expectations of external assistance. It is possible indeed that this was the development partners' polite way of conveying the bleak prospects for the stepping up of aid in the volumes and amounts requested by the LDCs. And this is the more plausible as representatives of most donor countries chose to emphasise, for the most, projects already in the pipelines of bilateral aid agreements.

The collective commitment of the international community to all the LDCs was left in doubt. It was obvious that particular development partners or groups of them focussed attention on particular LDCs or groups of them during the review meeting, on the basis of already established interests and known association. For some LDCs,

the number of donor countries taking part in the proceedings of the review meetings was rather limited, with the discussion mostly carried on and dominated by two or three traditional development partners. It was also clear that the development partners were not equally interested in all countries alike, and that their preferences were determined outside the conference hall.

The very attendance of development partners at the review meetings was far from completely satisfactory or indicative of the general and collective international support envisaged for each individual LDC from the international community. Not all trade and development partners who had been invited had accepted the invitations. Notably absent were most of the East European countries and some important OPEC members. For most donors who were represented, there were changes in composition of delegation from one cluster to another and sometimes even within clusters. Generally speaking, representatives coming from the headquarters of development partners were more reserved than those from embassies.

As if the review meetings were all but one aspect of an endless chain process, some LDCs were requested by development partners to review and revise their country presentations in time for the Paris meeting, taking into account the comments and suggestions made at the review meetings. But, do countries have the necessary time for such an exercise before Paris? Besides, of what use is such an exercise, when the reports of the review meetings are to be circulated merely as background papers at the Paris meeting, and no more. Paris notwithstanding, it would seem that there is a need for a pledging meeting for individual countries as a follow-up of the review meetings where development partners would have to make specific commitments and offers of aid. Without that, the review meetings would turn out to be of little use even as background and preparatory meetings.

However, the whole exercise of the review meetings has had some beneficial effects for the LDCs. The first is that the least developed countries did some hard thinking about their development for the decade, and incorporated these efforts into their development plans. This will no doubt help them in their continued bilateral and multilateral aid negotiations over the decade. The second is that they have had a chance to sound the opinions of development partners multilaterally, and, in their continued negotiations, they could refer to the cluster meetings as a source of political support for their requests. But even these modest gains would not materialize fully and lead to concrete and substantive results if there were to be no follow-up pledging meetings on a regular basis.